The Sun Sets on Chinchontepec: (Re)productions of Salvadoran Memory

Aida Campos

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The Sun Sets on Chinchontepec: (Re)productions of Salvadoran Memory

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of English from The College of William and Mary

by

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Williamsburg, VA
May 2nd, 2020
The Sun Sets on Chinchontepec
Para los recordados y no recordados,
los hambrientos y sedientos
que merecen pan y poesía por igual,
los desaparecidos pero aún aquí con nosotros,
los silenciados y amenazados.

Por todo lo que hemos heredado y todo lo que esperamos dar.

For those remembered and unremembered,
the hungry and thirsty
who deserve bread and poetry alike,
the disappeared but still here with us,
the silenced and threatened.

For all we have inherited and all we hope to give.
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On Creation

One day the gods gathered around Akú, the highest among them. In his powerful voice Akú asked, “Who is brave enough to travel down to Earth and create the first being?” The Gods stared at each other, waiting to see who would volunteer first. Grandmother Ish-Manahual raised her hand.

“I will go.”

The Gods stared in awe as Akú tied her with rope and dropped her down from the sky through a small hole until she reached the Earth. As she was being dropped down, Ish-Manahual clutched a sack full of stardust. Walking toward some caves, she collected cacao, herbal roots, and corn. Once she had everything she needed, she began to mix the stardust, cacao, roots, and corn in a pot, and with a grinding stone, she ground them down to a fine dust. She kept grinding and grinding and nothing happened.

What could be missing?

She knew she had to ask the spirit of the forest for help. When he heard her plea, the spirit of the forest sent Ish-Manahual a variety of different animals with different gifts. When the animals arrived at the cave, Ish-Manahual led them to her pot. One by one, she placed them inside.

The cusuco gave humanity our spine; the tortuga gave us our heart and the ability to love; the conejo gave us our reproductive systems; the mono gave us feet and the ability to dance; the jaguar gave us our abdomen and the feeling of hunger; the águila gave us thoughts and dreams.

Ish-Manahual’s pot became full with all these elements, when suddenly the first half blood emerged from the dust, Antawinikil. Still, Antawinikil, the first mortal, was born with skin too pale for Ish-Manahual’s taste. She felt he was too weak for the sun’s rays and went out to search for food to give him strength. On this search, Ish-Manahual began to create new plants like loroco and vanilla, too.

Back near the cave, the sky thundered loudly outside. Antawinkil curiously stepped out and looked up above him. He began to walk and walk until he arrived at a small lake. At this lake, Akú ordered Antawinikil to fall asleep next to a kapok tree covered in leaves of every color, brilliant in the sunlight. Akú then ordered La Gran Guara or La Guacamaya, the grand scarlet macaw, to lay an egg on Antawinikil’s head while he rested. He ordered la tamagás and la cascabel to protect the egg.

One day the ivory egg hatched and finally, Ti Wanatuku, the second Lenca was born. His name “Wanatuku” means “bird-being” since he was born from the macaw’s egg. As he broke out of his egg all the birds sang, nature’s sounds roared. Unlike Antawinikil, Ti Wanatuku was born brown-skinned and with wings feathered with beautiful blues, yellows, and reds like La Guacamaya’s. Antawinikil woke up and discovered his younger sibling. They embraced and both headed back towards the cave where Ish-Manahual awaited their return. At the cave, Akú told
Ish-Manahual that only one of them could stay on Earth. Ish-Manahual declared she needed to stay on Earth to take care of Ti Wanatuku. Akú accepted her decision.

As Antawinikil said his goodbyes, he noticed his younger brother’s sad face. Antawinikil kneeled down to grab a handful of sand from the cave floor and threw the sand into the air. Each grain of sand transformed into a small, blinking firefly and surrounded Ti Wanatuku as his eyes glowed and his spirits lifted. Before leaving, Antawinikil whispered the wisdom of life into Ti Wanatuku’s ear. Ti Wanatuku’s eyes widened as he received the beautiful gift of knowledge. Antawinikil jumped into the sky and flew toward the stars. When Ti Wanatuku saw his brother flying away, he tried to flap his wings to follow him. But Akú had already made Ti Wanatuku’s wings disappear.
they sit at our wooden table holding hands after dinner, blowing air into coffee mugs.
they begin with an inside joke they’ve pocketed for 30 years,
a ritual i can only clumsily stumble into.
between loud sips and muffled laughter, they edge closer.
i am small in front of them, eyes darting.
quesadilla crumbles on their paper napkins.
their fingers, greasy,
bring the sweet bread to their mouths.
they talk conversations full of
  Te recuerdas cuando...
  No vas a creer quién...
  Y vos no conocías a...
  Aquel que era novio de…
  Y no fue esa vez que...
a ritual of their own
like human bookkeeping,
a marriage spent
verifying that they still have their shit
straight with each other
and allá still means here, between them.

then they look at me as if to say,
  see for yourself dulzura, between all of us.
arrival

So i go through the automatic doors
these fluorescent lights have nothing
on what that sun demands
tropical moisture fills our lungs
searching...there—
an inhale, like a first breath
el abuelo Virgilio y la tía Ana almost like strangers
skin no longer fleshy
brown eyes haloed with a yellow-grey
pack the car, away
i would be lying if i told you i remembered these roads.
motorcycles zoom by in between lanes
with graffitti’d buses over 75 mph
a chaos only ruled by the hand of God
cocos at wooden stands on the side of the road
these dried palm leaf roofs.
split, pour, drink, eat
lunch in Usulután

Los Tacos Maya
fried tortilla, cheese, ground beef, ketchup sweet with cane sugar, and some valentina
the air hotter and hotter
San Miguel
dryness in the mouth.
we held onto our seatbelts. it was our fault, waiting so long to go get dinner, trying to find that damn pollo campero. no memory of the last main road.

laughter, born from the back of the throat.

we thought about those stories our taxi driver had told us. were they real?

the night before, in bed, i used the hotel wi-fi to get on twitter:

the eighth murder-free day in 19 years. alright.

two years ago:
a remarkable day in el salvador: a day without murder. enough.

we drove in circles in dimly lit neighborhoods, blocks of no streetlights, not even the barks of street dogs
my aunts prayed softly, thumbing the golden crosses around their necks, my mother’s forehead damp. i looked out the windows, finding light only deep inside alleyways.

the woman on the gps, in her best “castellano”
El Bulevar Los Próceres
El Bulevar Los Próceres
El Bulevar Los Próceres

at a texaco we asked the attendant, a young man no older than nineteen, if he could point us to the pollo campero.

he puckered his lips to point us in the right direction, you know, that way we understand, we thanked him.

then a collective sigh at the towering neon, happy sign; we got to eat fried chicken that night.
To the shores of Coatepeque

Snake my way down Coatl’s sinewy slopes
past aluminum storefronts on cliffs
that feel more like home than brick and stucco.
I greet the locals with a smile,
watch them pull out a machete
hack open a coconut and guzzle,
a sour sun-warmed water
the azure crater is magnetizing,
its crystal plains
reflecting my race against the sun
slowly relinquishing behind the grove-topped hills
with faces like shadows.
when I finally arrive
to the bottom of the basin,
I run in.
Swim along the banks
of the earth’s gaping mouth,
and feel volcanic mud between
my toes.
I look to la Isla del Cerro,
imagine los indígenas pipiles
with their canoes teetering like Itzqueye’s
knife-pleated skirt, obsidian in the water,
buoyant on the aquamarine reservoir of their faith.
But now mansions, sleek with floor-length glass,
disrupt the geometry of the terrain,
perch on the shoreline like condors
cleaving those echoes from the lake
now silent with presidents, millionaires, thieves.
The stories of great grandmothers
no longer fit
in Coatepeque’s waters.
over a sopa de gallina india at La Cocina de la Abuela, Perquín, Morazán

a stray dog lays on the stone floor of the patio,
black tail swishing in the air
sending flies flying through the fog.

we huddle around
a singular bowl,
three styrofoam cups,
the steam from hot cocoa landing on my upper lip, sweating.

he leans in

Recuerdo una vez. Estaba cipote y estaba trabajando como... guardando vacas. Una vez, mi amigo y yo estábamos fregando, éramos relajos. De repente, aquel se detuvo con los ojos así, bien abiertos. Yo miré hacia arriba para ver lo que estaba mirando aquel. Y ahí venía un hombre en verde. Solo dijo: "No estamos buscando problemas, pero necesitamos llevarnos unas cuantas vacas. Dile a tu jefe que huyeron." Y nosotros solo nos quedamos allí...puchica. Jeeeee! Casi nos meamos. Comenzó a atar las vacas con cuerda, bueno, él y los otros hombres que vinieron con él. Las vacas siguieron lentamente. Los vimos hasta que uuuu se veían pequeños de cómo de lejos estaban. Al día siguiente escuché que allá por xxxxx les habían traído un rebaño de vacas para que les dieran leche como no había nada en ese entonces! Sí...eran buenos. A veces eran realmente buenos.

now
the bowl empty,
bones and grease.
The Sun Sets on Chinchontepec

As I drive away from voices
holding pages, fibers, bloodlines—us
in their tender timbres

the sun plunges
like a ripe cashew apple,
never out of season, a scarlet marañon bursting
at the bottom of the sky, dissolving into the earth’s bosom,
Chinchontepec.

these days—
full of
bakers sounding bike horns in the streets at dawn,
¡El pan!

the rooster’s boisterous anxieties

news of another U.S. mass shooting
radio stations playing Beatles covers in Spanish
caseroleadas,
the bangs and clunks of pots and pans

cemeteries littered with
empty bags of churros, with
black dogs as groundskeepers

headstones i’d never seen before
decked out with flower wreaths

pick-up trucks advertising ludicrous lotteries

unsuccessful border crossings,
waiting at the phone for a sign of life

buses brimming with bodies
burning rubber on asphalt

the whispers of infidelities
and blessings between wives

FBI warrants for neighbors
shared on el feisbu

minuta, barquillo, empiñada stops every couple miles

masked soldiers on the breaking news, soldiers marching into legislative buildings

the sign of the father,
the son,
the holy spirit

after every drive

—they still demand darkness.
IN EL SALVADOR
FINDET HEUTE EIN KRIEG STATT
ZWISCHEN DEM VOLK UND
EINER NUR NOCH VOM AUSLAND
GESTÜTZTEN MINDERHEIT

DIE UNTERDRÜCKUNG DER BEVÖLKERUNG
REICHT INZWISCHEN AN DEN VÖLKERMORD
ES GIBT TAUSENDE VON FLÜCHTLINGE
UND VERWUNDETE
ES DROHT DIE AUSLÄNDISCHE INTERVENTION

WIE KÖNNEN WIR HLEFEN?
MIT GELDSPENDEN, PROTESTBRIEFAKTIONEN
UND ÖFFENTLICHKEITSARBEIT
MIT DER FORDERUNG AN DIE
BUNDESREGIERUNG, DIE BEZIEHUNG ZUR
JUNTA VON EL SALVADOR ABZUBRECHEN UND
DIE VEREINIGTE OPPOSITION - FDR -
ANZUERKENNEN

EL SALVADOR WIRD SIEGEN!
C'est grâce seulement à l'aide des USA que la Junta garde maintenant au pouvoir. La seule solution qui reste maintenant aux USA, c'est d'intervenir directement.

Mais un peuple en lutte est invincible parce qu'il a avec lui la justice, et la vérité, et la solidarité internationale.

Pour apporter ton aide aux peuples d'Amérique centrale participe à la journée internationale de solidarité du Sahéli.

31 octobre

Rassemblement
Stands - Animation musicale - à partir de 14 heures
Place du Capitole
Comité Salvador - Nicaragua - Cides - 7 rue Gambetta
EL SALVADOR

une histoire à connaître

- 21 000 Km²
- 5 millions d'habitants
- 40% d'analphabètes
- 65% de population rurale
- 60% des enfants nés à la compagne meurent en bas âge

ET UNE SITUATION INSOUTENABLE

0,02% de la population possède 40% de tout ce que produit le pays. L'oligarchie a le monopole de la terre et du commerce.

Ce pouvoir d'une minorité possède un bras armé : les militaires. Ils se maintiennent par des coups d'État, la fraude électorale...

LA SEULE FONCTION DES MILITAIRES EST DE REPRIMER LE PEUPLE

AUJOURD'HUI, LE PEUPLE SALVADORIEN AFFRONTE L'OLIGARCHIE ET SES FORCES DE REPRESSION
EL SALVADOR
VENCERÁ
CON TU AYUDA
con tu ayuda
con tu ayuda
con tu ayuda
con tu ayuda
con tu ayuda
offering

I know how they met, what lies papi told mami to snatch her ass up
know they went to a dance that one time and the lights went out
think they were fighting, or maybe they kissed
know papi had seven girlfriends at one point
know mami hated her freckles so much she’d scrub her face extra hard at night

One time papi was eating dinner in the dark when, crunch!
A cucaracha had fallen from the ceiling onto his tortilla
mami used to tie strings around cicadas and fly them like kites
fat bodies zooming through the blue sky, wings playing like a guiro

I know they miss the Colón.
Did you know it’s worth $0.11?

In a phone call, mami and papi told me
Eso no es lo que pasó.
Said...they didn’t remember?

Mami said,

Voy a hablar con tu papá yo. Nosotros nos ayudamos a recordar.
A veces, cuando yo le pregunto cosas el se recuerda.

Sometimes, I forget they were ‘70s kids.

I forget papi was 17 when he married mami
forget mami had nearly birthed two babies by my age
forget I don’t really know
forget they never talked about this
I forget they can forget.
finding the Cave of Passions, el Cantón La Guacamaya

when you are unsure if those are eroded bullet casings in the gravel, the dust of fossilized bone, a rusted old colón—dried yucca is salty in the mouth

the ecosystem closes in flat leaves larger than the face, spider webs flash white between branches, the rotten fruit on the floor—everything alive among you.

a twenty-six year old man takes you down a dirt road, the sound of the rocks a meditation that grounds the smoothness of your brain, that rippleless memory.

he says his heroes knew these forests in the pitch black, only by the feel of tree bark, the bats whoops, the ashen moonlight.

he points to a hole in the clay ground once an earth-oven to cook their meals. the smoke of its fire would run through a tunnel, escape out of an opening two kilometers away. man, they pissed those bombers off.

across a wooden bridge, swinging above a gentle cascade we arrive to a large burrow, the way inside.

step down slowly where the light enters bats occasionally flurry at eye level he says, between 1981 and 1982 this is where la Radio Venceremos, was transmitted

two bamboo shoots holding up an antenna sharing with the world, a revolution.

[la regué. for i did not write down your name, you who allowed me that story, giver of memory]
Monseñor is buried with Salón Marinello in 1980

in the days approaching his funeral, the city filled with feet. a rebel song lingering in the streets, flyers plastered along half-paved roads, crinkled posters left behind and stomped.

imagine people like moths by a flickering light.

for nights in the capital, an insomniac waiting to hear a gunshot break the sky or the crackle of a clandestine voice on a radio signal.

on Palm Sunday, thousands arrived to follow their martyr to the end.

on this day, a bullet is finally released into the sticky air

they run in every direction that might scream sanctuary, crushed against steel fence, concrete, cobblestone cries smothered by bursts of gunfire, ear-ringing and asphyxiation from the smoke bombs, men collapsing at the church stairs, weeping children on their shoulders, shards of pelvis floating in the body.

on calle poniente,

a bomb finds a hiding spot in Doña Esperanza’s Salón Marinello.

the wooden frame of the family business ignites with an amber halo and smells of burning plastic. there is no time for knees to fall in prayer for the family eating chicharrones in the backroom, only feet to run, run, run

and el Monseñor, lying in his casket.
mumble-song from El Mozote

driving up the quiet summit
ejagged with wild brush,
towering pine of Morazán
a mumble-song only heard
between these people and the land

from this narrow road, muffled
but emerging like the mountain peak,
clouded in a foggy sheath
the breaths of people like undulations that the earth still holds onto //

two weeks before christmas, 1981
herded and rounded up
mothers carry their children,
whose naked bellies
press against their trembling ribs,
inside the church.
fathers, grandfathers, uncles, patriarchs
stand in the lines atlacatl drew out in the dirt,
follow their orders,
with barrels of US M16 assault rifles against their backs
the very same ones from Vietnam.

the church doors, kicked down
open fire
the church set ablaze,
“a gross exaggeration,” said the Reagan administration //

1992, el Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense
exhumes XXX children and infants, X still in the womb
from the parish floor.
XXXXX human skeletons are still scattered around the village,
every X mi radius, a potential mass grave. //
From the village square

every name

every one

engraved into my life.
A Letter Signed: Escuadrón de la Muerte

I come home
to the smell of cuajada,
salt lingering on adobe walls,
the sound of Rita tortillando,
clapping clumps of masa together.
The gospel she hums
carries through the house.

In the kitchen, a hello kiss
my hand on her hips
as I squeeze behind her,
back against hot stove.

I sit down, open the envelope

they left

hanging on the clothing line
outside our brick latrine
clipped onto the gaunt rope
like a white casket in the wind,
chickens clucking beneath it.

It’s a letter signed,

Escuadrón de la Muerte

In one paragraph they promise:

10 bullets to my head,
9 bullets to my father,
8 bullets a mi negra, Rita,

whose home in Cojutepeque

they say

carded the revolution, or
dreamt it alive in

the grandchildren we’ve nurtured inside its walls:
Tomás, whose first tooth I yanked out with a string
Elenita, who has no memories without the war,
Lupita, too small to fit on the tire swing hanging in the yard

Y al entrar tus hijos al país, también les toca la misma suerte.
They remember them too.

At my comedor, I sit.
My Rita flattening tortillas in her rough palms,
me, holding death in mine.
La dirección y nombre en el sobre son falsos. Lo demás es cierto.

Tienes tiempo de estar señalando de oreja a algunas personas de Santo Domingo, siendo estas personas honradas y humildes. Por esta cruz que si alguien se muere de hoy en adelante a manos de tus compinches terroristas, a ti te tocan 10 balazos, al viejo que tienes, y balazos, a tu buena 8 balazos porque en casa de ella se reúnen en Cojutepeque todos los subversivos, tus nietos morirán cualquiera que fuere su edad. Y al entrar tus hijos al país, también les toca la misma suerte.

**Escuadrón de la muerte.**
mornings

Keep that breath in,
crouched next to the camita de junco upstairs,
hand on your swollen belly,
holding your son’s head to your breast with the other.
The rooster crows once when the shooting starts.

The guerrilleros and the paramilitares before dawn;
silver firecrackers past the ear when the bullets break in.

Beads of sweat, beads of sweat.
The signal to exhale: enough dead for quiet.

When the sun rose,
your abuela liked to assess the damage before her morning coffee.

Today, six bullets straight through the refrigerator
The pot full of sopa de frijoles gashed and leaking
The passion fruits’ seedy pulp splattered

Rocking him on my lap, flattening his tuft of sweated hair with my palm,
I watched her stand by the door
looking out to the street, eyes squinted, your father by her side.

I heard your abuela calmly whisper,

Mira, allí vienen
pero no te vayas a meter
si no, van a decir que tenías miedo.

A man walks up to the door, rifle slung across his side.
Examines your father.
I think I hear,

Ehm, ¿ Vas a ir a la reunión en la tarde?

In the silence, all four of us turned to watch your brother,
sucking on my index finger, bouncing on my lap, infant hand grasping for something in the air.

—Mami, 21
When we are finally lost

Remember there is no hell but this world,
So we must swim through milk and honey
And hold on to ghost dogs for dear death.
For Armadillo, in his golden armor, waits for us on the other side.

Must kick our legs through the milk and honey,
Let Armadillo lead us through luscious cornfields and empty dirt trails
For Rabbit, leg thumping, waits for us on the other side
Where our journey will continue, when we are finally lost.

Let Rabbit lead us, up and down our land’s rolling hills
Until we reach a chilling lake that stretches out for miles
Where our journey will continue, drowned in our ancestors’ tears.
For Turtle, with its heart as big as its shell, waits for us inside the salty waters.

Must hold our breath for miles in the chilling lake, let Turtle bathe us.
Release that weight we carry, the crushing pain from loved ones left behind,
For Jaguar, with his jagged smile, waits for us at the lakeshore.
Ride Jaguar’s smooth back deep into the jungle forest, as our journey nears its end.

Must release, breathe, stretch our limbs newly freed of pain.
For the Monkeys, with their curly tails and dancing feet, wait for us among the vines.
Swing to the Monkeys’ music, deeper into the jungle until Eagle spots us from above.
Let Eagle take us to la Gran Guacamaya, beloved scarlet macaw.
¿dónde están?
tierra arrasada y quitando el agua al pez

O sea, destruyeron completamente // el agua//
la población civil, los indígenas
y // el pez//
la guerilla

Those with the world in their hands still look to the stars for more.
it is never enough. it is never enough. it is never enough. it never is. It is
considered communist to know there is enough to feed the poor, to not want
white america, to be curious about why they are
always here to provide the guns, bloodthirst, the audacity
to damage the heart and spirit, the CIA is best at teaching how to

Dry up the pond, and watch the fish flail.
Do not let them choose for themselves. Collect bodies like baby teeth
in our mother’s bedroom drawers.
Bury children and take from woman
the right to her body. Listen here boys

this is how you line them up, this is how you pile them up, this is how you clean after yourself

Chilean communist musician Víctor Jara sang:

“Soldado no me dispares,
soldado. Yo sé que tu mano tiembla
soldado no me dispares.”

Batallón Atlácatl forgot they did that. Of course, others did too.
buildings collapsed, 500 lb bombs made craters in the forests, and 8,000
disappeared.

Insurgency is not the U.S. making available nearly $55 million dollars to kill
with helicopters and military supplies, but it is
wanting to feed your kids instead of the general’s dogs.
morsels

mami rolls up her sleeves
to show me a 6 inch scar on her right arm
where the barbed wire ripped her open.
some 40 years ago, running home from the cry of

¡Guerrilleros!
¡Vienen a llevarse a las muchachas!
in the night.

one of the only memories she still feels, the rest,
morsels of a life she’s put away,
crumbs you brush under the tablecloth.

says:
consider me lucky it was only this.

of course I’d see the guards swinging in the park,
gouged of eyes and teeth, skin white from bleeding out.

when the abusive militia was massacred by the guerilla, the people said

¡‘Ta bueno hijos de putas!

Tu abuelita se ponía a escuchar a la Radio Venceremos, you know.

Todo quedó completamente destruido. Los dos hicieron barbaridades.

There was that time, during recess… I think I was playing basketball. I dropped the ball and it
rolled away into a small creek nearby. When I went to pick it up, it was sitting on something
white and lumpy. I grabbed a stick and moved the ball. Y en eso vi que era un brazo. Blanquito, blanquito, sin sangre. A professor.

Both sides left us fucked. Los dos nos dejaron jodidos.

Still. Back then they didn’t extort you like these pandillas.

Hoy, si vos no les das un peso te matan.

Tal vez los acuerdos de paz fueron firmados, pero la guerra continuó.
On an eroding brick wall in El Tránsito, San Miguel

ROQUE  
NOT  
DEAD

in flaking white paint and mud

caking in the sun.
To the left, his head with a full black mohawk, a bushel of unchipped spikes poking through the overhanging leaves of a neighboring tree.
A gecko writhes its slick body down his nose.
Dark circles under his eyes, an eerie black shadow of ash-mold-moss
exposing him like a burnt photograph punk as hell.

In El Tránsito, San Miguel
las mercaderas call their rowdy kids

sons of bitches // hijo’e putas,

lay wet kisses on the tops of their heads.
La chota walks around with AKs strapped to their bodies,
bolitos, lay their heads on strips of concrete
in front of homes, the only ones left with shade.
One of them takes a piss in the grass under the stencil of the martyr,
on his fired-clay canvas.

A block away
the women at their puesto

toast buns atop a portable stove,
selling hot dogs salvadoreños,
snickering about fulanas on the street
with smiles full of gold capped teeth,
shooing a pregnant dog away from the grill.

In the evening I imagine their customers,
the line reaching to the end of the block.
Desperate breaths of paint on that wall,
a distant relative taped into a family album.
some kind of alive

Sun draws shadows of *centavitos*, kidney weeds on his face. Hunched over, he slides a small machete down the cobs.


The maíz stains the grooves of his palms. Occasionally, kernels leap onto his greying mustache, fall into his gummy mouth. I swing on the hammock, barefoot. Sweat beading above my lip. The nylon threads of the hammock stick to my thighs. I don’t see the pistol, hidden in his holster. Above us, his parrot sings in curses.

In this small country, the shuffling of vendors, the growls of street dogs, ants crawling out of bullet holes. An unknown boy arrives on our street, says to the neighbors he’s selling garlic. Sits at the stairs of the house across from us. Stares at us, smugly. Listens.

The parrot, silent. My neck breaking to watch the boy stare.

Abuelo drops the corn, stands, knee caps cracking. Walks out to the pavement, his back to me. Lifts his sweaty button-up just above the belt loops. And there it is. He grasps the pistol in his hand. The polished, cedar grip flashes in the boy’s eyes.

*Abuelo!*

My voice breaks. The boy rises, mouth in one straight line across his face, looks me in the eye. He walks away, hands empty. Says nothing. Disappears down the road.

Abuelo ambles towards me. Then me, eyes still agape.

My temples burning.
In 2016 at least 600,000 Salvadorans had no access to drinking water. Some locals engineer their own plumbing systems to distribute water.

Makeshift means a stand-in, just enough to make it through for now.

In 2018 a right-wing bloc took over the Legislative Assembly and moved toward giving corporations control over water. Students, faculty, and staff of the University of El Salvador marched to present their demands for water rights. The marches spread throughout the country with thousands in the streets in two days. El Foro del Agua, a coalition of environmental and community organizations in the homeland and organizations like the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) continue to fight back and defend the right to water for all people.

Aquí, quienes han manejado la cuestión del territorio han sido prácticamente la industria y los grandes empresarios urbanizadores.
Karen Ramirez

The neoliberal reality: makeshift is no longer temporary; disregard for life is not short-term, it’s profitable.

They want to erect “mini-cities” made up of luxury homes from the earth the old architecture, rainbowed and iron-decorated, are only ruins on the outskirts of minimalist opulence. They do not give a fuck about your great-aunt’s casita de lámina.

In Antiguo Cuscatlán, La Libertad, there is a golf and country club. The models on its website, all white, laughing on the bright green grass.

Imagine that.
GRACIAS MADRE NATURALEZA
POR EL AGUA PARA BEBER
EL AIRE PARA RESPIRAR
LA TIERRA PARA SIMBRAR
EL FUEGO PARA COCINAR
the threads looped around your finger as a child, 
life strings released.

release those visions you’ve kept

necks hacked right in front of you, red and gummy
the pineapple jam stuffed inside el pan dulce you enjoy

riding in chicken buses, painted with murals only
your eyes could see
the men hanging from the yokes suspended on árboles de tamarindo
outside the empty homes of the wealthy

when you were eleven

the mornings before school, darting to cemeteries to see
if the rumors were true, if orejas were really taken apart

or if the disappeared could ever be found, you are afraid
when the paramilitary herds you off the bus,
you push the rifle away at seventeen

do you still hunt garrobos with your sling shot?
run in front of store shops and snag those wooden yo-yos?
run until you reach the outskirts of town?
throw stones at beehives with your boy scout buddies and laugh when you get stung?
¿todavía lo siguen las cipotas?

reel that string back up between your fingers papi,

Remember?

Dear wingless parrot in my tía’s house,

Become small in her fists. Do not tremble when she shears your forelimbs soon after your egg cracks. Disimagine flight, instead swallow down her curses, fearlessly play devout. Understand: this is how she nests her adoration, one last conjuring of faith that you too won’t run away, breakout along with children, neighbors, and brothers. You are all she gets to keep; your voice box of kikikis and aaa caaas a recording of her children’s laughter. Let her feel baby hairs in your feathers, feed you like an empty gut full with chops of lengua, with stories of cadavers.
The Cave-Keeper

Ti Ketau Antawinikil, the start of us all.
Exorcised in Spanish, La Gruta del Espíritu Santo.
That rust-red handprint on the stone wall, our ancient friend, waves yampáre.

Safe in the shadows of what we were before, a treasure
of a thousand years, I count obsidian and ash,
Ti Ketau Antawinikil, you are the start of us all.

All 25 acres of cave-world and land,
cross memory—erupt in dialogue with
that rust-red Balám Colóp, father of our jaguar-tongue, whisper yampáre.

At dawn, the song of crickets still echoes
meshes into the sedimentary layers of this home
where Ish-Manahual created you, Antawinikil, the start of us all.

Your descendants scattered like seeds across epochs and land mass,
new generations desperate for this truth,
this rust-red cave, the womb which delivered you, your first yampáre.

I am one of your keepers, these hands calloused with rock dust,
and flesh dug with with deep lines like petroglyphs that remind me of you
Ti Ketau Antawinikil—remind me of the start,
a rust-red bloodline, a duty to protect, to never say akú-ki.
inheritance

the nawat-pipil word for ___ is ____.

the government is no stranger to death
in 1932 or 2003 or 2019; at any given point
there may be more eggs in a carton
than wealthy families in El Salvador.

in the cornfields and the coffeelands,
the mercados and the clinics,
only promises of hope.

when people are lost like language, land, and water
abuelo says to call each meal a susto, a scare.

a lifetime of passing, the only survival
my abuelos’ cackles
this, i want to inherit.

still, la matanza seems everlasting when wars live
on in secret and being hungry and poor is a crime

because arbitrary means unlucky
when la mano dura picks you up
and overcrowded prisons can be heard from here

keep your guns and your borders,

‘cause I don’t go to church, but God told me
instead of souls, send him stories.
On Creation
This story and all following mentions of Lenca beliefs and history were shared by Danilo Vásquez, a Lenca poet, leader, and defender who has offered so much valuable information to me through personal conversations and recorded interviews available on youtube. Antawinikil and Ti Wanatuku are painted holding hands on the caves in Corinto. As of 2020, the Lenca people still do not receive the recognition, preservation, and resources they deserve. Their landmarks continue to be unprotected by the national government. However many of their traditions live on.
https://youtu.be/P-9njc8u1rw.

In Cacaopera the people still celebrate, *el baile de los emplumados*, the dance of the feathered ones, in honor of Ti Wanatuku.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-9njc8u1rw&t=1824s.

lost in san salvador, 8:45 pm
From an August 2019 Independent UK article, two days after my arrival.

“El Salvador’s new president has touted a rare day without a homicide in the small Central American nation where such violence is a part of daily life.

From a January 2017 New York Times article about another murderless day two years ago.

“Yet even with the decline, the murder rate was more than 80 homicides per 100,000 residents last year, compared with five per 100,000 in the United States in 2015, according to the most recent F.B.I. figures.” The F.B.I., a reputable source.

To the shores of Coatepeque
“This” is the Nahuatl word for serpent.

Itzqueye is considered the highest goddess by the Pipil people. Based on my research her name can be interpreted as “the one with the obsidian skirt.” This goddess also corresponds to several other Mayan female deities from different mesoamerican Indigenous groups.

Note that the Nawat-Pipil or Pipil people of El Salvador are believed to have migrated from central (current day) Mexico before 1000 AD. They are the founders of Cuzcatlán.

over a sopa de gallina india in La Cocina de la Abuela, Perquin, Morazan
“I remember once. I was a kid and I was working herding cows. Once, my friend and I were
messing around, we were clowns. Suddenly, he stopped with his eyes wide open. I looked up at what he was looking at. And a kid in green was coming. He just said: "We're not looking for trouble, but we need to take a few cows. Tell your boss that they ran away." And we just stayed there, shit. Jeeeee! We almost pissed ourselves. He and a group of men began to tie up the cows with a rope and they took them away. The cows followed slowly. We watched them until they looked small from how far away they were. The next day I heard that over by xxxx they had brought a herd of cows to give them milk since there was nothing back then! Yes ... they were good. Sometimes they were really good.”

The Sun Sets on Chinchontepec
Chinchontepec is the Nahuatl name for the San Vicente Volcano. The name translates to “mountain of two breasts,” referring to the local folklore. Legend has it that thousands of years ago a beautiful woman jumped into the volcano in an attempt to avoid all her suitors. That same day the volcano erupted. After that eruption, the volcano took the form of a woman lying down on the landscape.

During my time in El Salvador my grandfather’s step-son showed me FBI warrants for neighbors and town members under investigation for different crimes that were being shared on social media. The FBI expects people to turn their neighbors in.

offering
“That’s not what happened.”

“I’ll talk to your dad. We help each other to remember. Sometimes, when I ask him things he remembers.”

Monseñor is buried with Salon Marinello in 1980
Based on a story shared by a friend’s mother whose grandmother owned a salon that was opened in San Salvador in the 1940s. Days after Monseñor Óscar Romero’s assasination, riots broke out throughout the city. During one of these armed confrontations, a bomb landed inside the salon, destroying it and nearly killing a family that was living in the back of the building.

From a March 31, 1980 Washington Post article by Christopher Dickey
“40 Killed in San Salvador; 40 Killed at Rites For Slain Prelate; Bombs, Bullets Disrupt Archbishop's Funeral”
https://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/romero-wp-3-31-80.html

finding the Cave of Passions, el Cantón La Guacamaya
A cave from which Radio Venceremos broadcasted for a period of time beneath a thick layer of rock. Radio Venceremos was a rebel radio network broadcasted by the guerilla during the war, founded by Carlos Henríquez Consalvi a.k.a Santiago.

The colón was the currency of El Salvador from 1892 up until it was replaced by the US dollar in 2001. In my mother’s words “es lo mas estúpido que podría haber pasado,” or “it was the
stupidest thing that could have ever happened. “La gente no gana en dollars, pero las cosas se cobran en dollars.” “The people don’t earn in dollars, but things are charged in dollars.”

**mumble-song from El Mozote**
A town in Morazán, El Salvador. Widely known for the massacre that took place here in December 1981 in which U.S.-trained Salvadoran army officials murdered hundreds of women, children, and men. There are still body remains being exhumed today.

**A Letter Signed: Escuadrón de la Muerte**
“And upon your children’s re-entry to the country, they too face the same luck.”

Based on a real letter archived at el Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen in San Salvador.

**mornings**
“Look there they come
but don’t go inside
otherwise they’ll say you were scared”

“When, are you going to the meeting in the evening?”

**When we are finally lost**
Based on a Lencan afterlife story shared by Danilo Vásquez.

**tierra arrasada y quitando el agua al pez**
tienda arrasada y quitando el agua al pez scorched earth and taking away the fish’s water

The title and subject matter of this poem describe the policies and strategies that the Salvadoran government and armed forces, as influenced under the U.S. government and C.I.A, used in order to isolate the guerrilla and control the civilian population. With these policies in place, numerous villages were destroyed, people were tortured, massacred, and or disappeared, and women and girls were raped at the hands of the Salvadoran Army.

“Soldier don’t shoot me,
soldier. I know that your hand trembles
Soldier don’t shoot me.”

From the song “Cancion del Soldado” by Victor Jara, a Chilean communist musician. I found these lyrics, and other supporting information in a report created by NISGUA (Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala). Similar strategies were used in Guatemala and other neighboring Central American nations by their respective national armed forces.

Batallón Atacatl was the counter-insurgency Salvadoran army unit most known for being responsible for the massacre at El Mozote, though they committed other war crimes as well. This battalion was trained in 1980 in the U.S. Army’s School of the Americas.
The numbers in this couplet were provided by the same local tour guide mentioned in *finding la cueva de las pasiones, el Cantón La Guacamaya*.

From an article published in a 1982 issue of *Strategic Analysis*, a bimonthly defense strategies journal. At the time, the *latest* records reported that the U.S. planned to put $55 million dollars worth of helicopters and military supplies into the hands of the Salvadoran army.

https://doi.org/10.1080/09700168209427576.


**morsels**

“They’ve come to take the girls!”
‘That’s what you get sons of bitches!”
“Your grandmother would listen to Radio Venceremos, you know.”
“Everything was left completely destroyed. Both of them committed barbarities.
“All of a sudden I realized it was an arm. White, white, white, without blood.”
“Today, if you don’t give a dollar they kill you.”
“Maybe the peace accords were signed but the war continued.”

**On an eroding brick wall in El Tránsito, San Miguel**

Mercaderas are local market women. They’ll love you when they love you and they’ll hate you when they hate you. They know all the gossip in town.

La chota slang for police
bolitos homeless, drunk folks.
fulanas random, unnamed women.

**makeshift**

From a 2016 UN Human Rights Council Report about the access to safe drinking water and sanitation in El Salvador.

https://www.refworld.org/docid/57cd86c84.html.

From a 2018 *National Geographic* article about the effects of global climate change and eco-capitalism on El Salvador’s public water supply.


From a 2018 CISPES youtube video with Karen Ramirez, a community organizer and member of the Foro de Agua.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEUrSWK-rPc&t=2416s

From a 2018 CISPES article on the movement against water privatization in El Salvador.

From a 2020 CISPES article about Valle del Angel megadevelopment project that threatens the water supply of thousands of Salvadorans in San Salvador.

Mini-cities are real-estate projects popping up in El Salvador that are made up of blocks of luxury, residential and commercial spaces.

casita de lámina

The Cave-Keeper
Ti Ketau Antwinikil means Stone House of the Human Being in the Lenca language. It is the real name for the sacred cave now known as The Grotto of the Holy Spirit in Corinto, El Salvador. It is believed to be the origin of the first human being. Cave art has survived for thousands of years on its walls. The cave is taken care of by community members but this poem refers to Danilo Vásquez who offered so much valuable information to me. As of 2020, the Lenca people still do not receive the recognition, preservation, and resources they deserve. Their landmarks continue to be unprotected by the national government.

Balám Colóp was a Lenca prince who brought language to the culture according to Lenca beliefs. Ish-Manahual is a Lenca mother-earth goddess.

Yampáre is the Lenca-Taulepa word for “hello.” Akú-ki is the Lenca-Taulepa word for “goodbye.”

From the following blog from Charles Martin who was able to directly learn Lenca history from Danilo: http://elguanacocharles.blogspot.com/2014/09/.

Inheritance
In 1932 a “peasant” uprising broke out led by farmers and communist thinkers, many of whom were Pipil people, who demanded better living and working conditions. The Salvadoran government responded by killing between 10,000 and 40,000 people “suspected” of being involved. This is now known as “La Matanza.”

Under former President Francisco Flores, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) passed “Mano Dura” or “Firm Hand” or “Iron Fist” in 2003. This plan allowed the government to grant the military more power, increase the policing of areas suspected to be held by gangs, and hold mass arrests based on appearance. The failed policy largely led to higher rates of homicides, extrajudicial executions, and crowded prisons.

In 2019 Nayib Bukele became the 46th president of El Salvador. Though he showed promise to a lot of people with no hope left in the Salvadoran political system, many social justice groups have now condemned Bukele for his militaristic, capitalistic, and authoritarian actions, plans, and policies during his first year in office. The people continue to fight.
**Photos**

From archives in el Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen in San Salvador | Pgs. 15-17, 28
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From el Museo de la Revolución in Perquín, artist unknown | Pg. 18
From a convent in Morazán, artist unknown | Pg. 23
From a wall in El Tránsito, artist unknown | Pg. 35
From the city square in El Mozote, artist unknown | Pg. 38
My grandfather’s hands | Pg. 43
Thank you to Professor Pineda, Professor Tandeciarz, Professor Eriksen for being friends, mentors, and amazing storytellers. Thank you for teaching me that it is okay to use my voice.

Thank you to everyone in the “Escritores y Artistas Salvadoreñxs/Salvi Artists and Writers” Facebook group, but especially Willy Palomo, Janel Pineda, Alberto López Serrano, and Alexandra Lytton Regalado who welcomed me and helped me get here.

Thank you to Sra. Miranda for sharing her family’s story.

Thank you to Jakelyn, the lovely archivist at el MUPI.

Thank you to the local tour guide whose face I will always remember.

Thank you to Danilo Vásquez for his bravery and wisdom.

Thank you to all the friends who have read or heard these poems and supported me.

Thank you to B.B., who has helped me polish almost everything I’ve written since 2016, including this collection. I love you.

Most of all, thank you to my entire family, from the oldest to the youngest, the most extended to the closest, for showing me, everyday, the joys of story and memory.